THE DIVINE DISTURBANCE
ACTS 2:1-13

MAY 28, 1972
COMMUNION MEDITATION

Did you ever have a tremendous experience that touched you so deeply and moved you emotionally? Has anything ever happened to you about which you could say, "This is important: this is what life is about: this is a rare and beautiful moment of truth, clarity and divine inspiration"? And then have you ever tried to communicate the essence of that experience to someone else? It is a frustrating project, because in a very real sense it can never be done.

When I go back East and play the game of "one-upmanship" with my old friends, I try to convey to them something of what happens in Mackey Arena prior to a Purdue basketball game. I tell them about 14,000 people standing up cheering and the band playing: about Doctors and lawyers and well-to-do matrons clapping and joining in an experience of communal hope and ecstacy. But my explanation never really conveys the essence of the experiance - because you have to be there. And in fact, to try to reduce that expierience to ideas and words, is sometimes to sound a little strange, unreal, or worse.

Well, that's part of the problem the writers of the New Testament had with Pentecost. As they thought about it later, and turned their literary skill to the task of describing it they had a major problem. Because you had to have been there.

Weeks had gone by since the crucifixion and the resurrection appearences of JESUS Christ. The disciples, and other followers of Jesus were still in Jerusalem. waiting. I can emagine them spending a lot of time planning their next move, strategizing about the right time and place to begin the job their Lord had given them. But always there were good, sound reasons to wait. And then Pentecost, the great Jewish festival, and the city filled with pilgrims. They were there too, mingling with the crowds: and suddenly the moment they had been waiting for arrived. Peter was no orator: but midway through the day of Pentecost Peter got up and in unmistakably clear language delivered himself of a powerful articulation of the Gospel. The people who heard it were moved and responded. The other disciples somehow shared in the experience: men of all nations and races sensed themselves drawn together and suddenly able to communicate with each other. It was an inspired moment. A

moment that had to be shared.

And later, when they wrote it down they described it in terms of wind and tongues of fire. Everytime I read that account or think about it I know their problem - you had to have been there.

As the Church looks back at its history, it has always pointed to that experience as the beginning because of two things which happened. First, the early Christians sensed on Pentecost that the Spirit of God was drawing them together in a relationship that transcended barriers of nationality, race, language: they sensed, on that day, that they were indeed one - one body. Second, the early Christians sensed on Pentecost that the same Spirit that was drawing them together as individuals - was pushing and prodding them corporately out into the world. That is the essence of the Pentecost experience: the divine disturbance that pulled together a group of unrelated people and after it had made them into a new community pushed them out into the rough and tumble world of the first century in the name of Jesus Christ. Their testimony - which comes through the symbols of rushing wind and tongues of fire - is that the power behind this experience came from outside: it was not something they generated such as the spirit generated by cheerleaders at a ball game. It literally happened to them. They called that power Holy Spirit: the same spirit which in the Old Testament is the energy - the vitalizing, life giving presence of God. The early Christians felt it, and knew it was the same phenominum they had experienced in the presence of Jesus Christ. For them, this is most important of all, the phrase "The Holy Spirit" was not a theological proposition, but a fact of experience. It pointed, not to an idea, but to something that had happened.

The problem today in talking about the Holy Spirit is that we Presbyterians can't get away from our cerebral preception of the Gospel. We want to define "Holy Spirit" - talk about him as a person separate from God, discuss his activity as we might discuss the activities of a minister or school teacher. While on the other end of the spectrum the Pentecostals put the Spirit in a box and expect the experience of the first Pentecost to be repeated literally everytime they get together. Both approaches, it seems to me, miss entirely the meaning of Pentecost - namely the

drawing together of God's people into a new community, and the moving of that community out into the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

My assumption is that the Holy Spirit is present in his church: and that the presence of the spirit is not really debatable: that it makes no more sense to say that the Spirit is not in that Church or this group, than it does to claim that there is no sun in the sky because it is a cloudy day. My assumption is that the Spirit of God is here whenever we feel ourselves drawn together - in conversation - over a cup of coffee - in a study group - during prayer - while we are singing - in a committee meeting. My assumption is that the Spirit of God moves here when people express impatience with society and keep pushing the Church into new avenues of service. My assumption is that we live in the spirit - and that it is unnecessary to keep trying to define it, and reproduce magic moments. My assumption is that the Holy Spirit is at work everytime this congregation gathers to worship: and that if we do feel ourselves drawn together and then sent out with a job to do, it is because the Spirit of God has found us receptive that day.

All of that becomes clear for me whenever I am given the opportunity to observe the Church at work. And last week I had that opportunity at the 184th meeting of the General Assembly of the United PRESBYTERIAN Church. Let me share with you, or best I can, three expressions of the Spirit of God at work in the Church -as I experienced them. The assembly met in a vast new convention hall. Behind the platform, against a fifty foot blue drape was a sillouette of the robed form of Jesus and the words "We are the Body of Christ". The unique thing about it was that this giant silouette was made up of thousands of pictures of people. From a distance it looked like small flecks of color. But to sit beneath that form for several days = and to know that the body was people - and to hear and see B lacks, Browns, Indians, Orientals, poor people, wealthy people, engaging in the work of the Church - was to sense again that we are involved in a great work - a work enabled by the unifying Spirit of God himself.

That was at the front of the hall. At the back were booths displaying the work of the Church. And the one that spoke most eloquently to me contained two calves and a tank full of catfish. The calves were the product of a feeder lot and ranch

operation owned and run by American Indians, made possible by the Presbyterian Church through the Fund for the Self-Development of People. The catfish - the products of a Catfish farm on the Mississippi Delta, also made possible, by the same fund.

That's the divine disturbance of Pentecost - the work of the Spirit today the unifying law of Christ and the movement of our Church out into God's world to help and heal and set free. And I want very badly for the Presbyterians here to know that we are a part of that.

All of that was summarized for me one morning as the Assembly convened with worship. Three Indian young people appeared on the platform. One played the guitar and sang the Lord's prayer. The other two performed an interpretive dance using the movements and expressions of their ancient tradition. And the Assembly broke into applause and said - We are one: and we are in the world because the Spirit of God will not allow us to be elsewhere.

So my assumptions and my word to you this morning: that the Spirit of God is here - just as he was here at Pentecost. That there is an energy in our midst drawing us together and then pushing us out into our world in his name. W

We affirm and celebrate that Spirit this morning at the table of our Lord in bread broken and a cup shared. May it be, for us, - a divine disturbance: an affirmation of our oneness - and a moving out together into the world our Lord calls us to serve. AMEN

Father, we are grateful for the history of your church and for the moving of your spirit down acorss the centuries. As we come to your table this morning, help us to be alive to the moving of that same spirit in our midst. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN